

## In profile: IDRC awardee Anna-Marie Ball



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While AIDS is a global threat, there are many differences, among regions of the world and social groups, in the extent and risk of HIV spread. High risk groups and problem regions have been identified, yet the matter goes deeper than the typical categorizations.

Sub-saharan Africa has been noted as a problem area, but Botswana is one country where the medical community is particularly concerned about exceptionally high rates of HIV infection. In 1993 they estimated that 1 in 7 sexually active people were HIV positive. Youth is a group of exceptional concern, since rates of HIV infection are increasing among them. In particular, females tend to be infected at a younger age and more easily than males.

These trends are occurring despite programs which have provided for relatively good access to condoms and education about safe sex. Anna-Marie Ball believes that the reason these programs have failed to influence youth behaviour towards safer sex is because there has been a lack of attention to the views of youth on sex and risk. If effective AIDS education is to be provided for youth, it must be more accurately targeted to the reality of being a young person in contemporary Botswana.

Anna-Marie's research set out to illuminate the youth reality and views on sex, as well as the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which these views are formed. While AIDS research has focussed on the role of individual decision-making in sexual behaviour, it has neglected the larger social and cultural factors which influence individuals. By placing an in-depth study of youth sexual behaviour within the larger social and cultural context, Anna-Marie has come out with a new look at AIDS and sexual risk in southern Africa. The insights of her study have already been shared with organizations involved in AIDS-prevention initiatives.

Anna-Marie picked one village (Palapye) in Botswana and constructed a picture of what life is like for youth growing up there. She lived with a family in the village for six months and stayed in Botswana for an entire year. Investigating such a sensitive issue required patience and care in the choice of research methods. Role playing, group discussions, story telling, ranking games, and interviews were adapted in ways that Botswana youth could relate to and enabled them to be open about the subject.

The results provide interesting insights. Just as there are differences in HIV infection among age and gender groups, Anna-Marie found that there are differences between groups in attitudes toward sexual relationships. Males and females have different expectations about love and sex; youth attending school have different attitudes than school drop-outs.

The results also show that condoms are used only sporadically. While youth may believe that they are invincible or invulnerable to STDs, HIV, and pregnancy, another explanation, according to Anna-Marie, lies in societal attitudes which associate issues of trust, intimacy, and pleasure with condom use. If a condom is used, often it means that the partner is not trusted or considered "not well enough known." Not to use condoms means that you trust your partner, your partner trusts you; it is an intimate relationship with more pleasure.

AIDS death statistics reveal that many women are dying in their twenties, meaning they are often infected during their teens. Generally, men are dying later, in their early thirties, implying infection in their twenties. According to Anna-Marie, there are cultural reasons for this difference related to the choice of sexual partners. The sexual partners of teenage girls tend to be several years older than them. Older men tend to have more sexual partners, more episodes of unprotected sex, and more exposure to HIV than younger women. Thus, a teen girl is more vulnerable and at greater risk to HIV than a teen boy of the same age.

Given prevailing societal attitudes on condoms-use, women or girls which demand it may be perceived to undermine trust and intimacy. Refusing sex or negotiating condom use with a partner is difficult for females, because of the potential for violence against them. In addition to issues of intimacy and the power dynamics of gender relations, the extent to which individuals are able to respond to perceived risks is limited by economic factors.

While AIDS education in Botswana should have many objectives, one aim, according to Anna-Marie, should be to reverse social meanings such that condom-use becomes seen as a complement, rather than an obstacle, to trust, intimacy, and pleasure. This is a big challenge because feelings about condom use are deeply-rooted, especially among adults. But Anna-Marie is convinced that avenues to contain the spread of AIDS lie not with adults but with youth, who "must be empowered to seek ways in which they can protect their lives."

Source: [IDRC Training and Awards Unit](#)